DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 444 396 FL 801 398

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TITLE	Messages Conveyed by an Adult Learning Center. Practitioner Research Briefs, 1999-2000 Report Series.
INSTITUTION	Arlington Public Schools, VA. Virginia Adult Education Research Network.
SPONS AGENCY	Virginia Association of Adult and Continuing Education, Charlottesville.
PUB DATE	2000-08-00
NOTE	4p.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.vcu.edu/aelweb/vaern.html.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Education; *Community Centers; Community Programs; Community Role; *Community Support; *English (Second Language); Immigrants; Interviews; Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning

ABSTRACT

The focus of this practitioner brief is: What are the messages being conveyed by a learning center? What is it about the learning center that makes the people want to come? The author, the director of the adult learning center, decided she could best answer these questions by interviewing a lead teacher at the center. According to this teacher, when people came to the center, the primary message they received was one of reassurance. Most of the people who come to the center are foreign born adults who need to learn English and adjust to life in the United States. The supportive reassurance they receive from the staff and from each other is a significant motivator. It is concluded that people who need help in learning need more than convenient access to resources; they also need some kind of reassurance. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education) (KFT)

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Messages Conveyed by an Adult Learning Center

Carol Eager, Fairfax County Public Schools

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Practitioner Research Briefs, 1999-2000 Report Series

Messages Conveyed by an Adult Learning Center

Carol Eager, Fairfax County Public Schools

Background

At age fifty-five, I am becoming an adult. I am excited about lifelong learning. New to the world of adult education, I recently read the following psychological description of an adult by Malcolm Knowles:

An adult is one who has arrived at a self-concept of being responsible for one's own life, of being self-directing. As adults we need to be perceived by others as capable of taking responsibility for ourselves.

I never knew Malcolm, but his definition puts into words the type of adult I would like to become.

Four months ago, I was assigned to work at an ABE/GED learning center in my neighborhood. I do not know if anyone in this center had read Malcolm Knowles, but his ideas were coming to life before me. In my new position, I would be part of a team effort to change Fairfax County's ABE/GED learning centers into resource centers. The centers would provide resources for a person to continue their journey of lifelong education as a parent, citizen, or worker. At the center in my neighborhood, there were twenty-two adults of different ages, from eight different countries, speaking five different languages. They were diverse yet united at the center. I wondered, however, what drew them in? What had they heard that made them want to come?

Inquiry

What are the "messages" being conveyed by a learning center?

Action

I decided to find out what was happening here. Although I was a supervisor, every Monday morning I became an aide to lead teacher, Bette Hinkle. I watched and I listened in her class. Taking meaningful notes was impossible because I would be swept into whatever learning situation was evolving. Finally, after five weeks of observing through participation, I decided to ask Bette some questions.

Data Collection

After listening and looking for messages at the center for five Monday mornings, I interviewed Bette using sixteen questions. By asking, "What is your goal for the center?" I heard her describe the resource center concept. After our forty-five minute recorded interview, I had gained a deeper understanding of why students were drawn to the center.

Findings

At first glance, the learning center appeared to offer a typical English as a Second Language class. After weeks of observation and one forty-five minute interview, however, I knew there was more than English being learned. When people came to the center, a primary message they received was that of reassurance. Bette explained,

"I think all of them initially are very frightened. Of course, they have double things to be frightened of. Most adults are afraid to go back to school, particularly if they did not have a good experience the first time, fearful of studying for a test. Our students, so many of them being foreign born, have the additional fear of being in a strange place. Nobody speaking their language, they think, and it's just going to be very frightening. I can relate to this, having lived overseas for a few years. It is scary to be in a strange place. Being asked to fill out a form, not sure, if you can figure out what it all is. I hope that I will have time to be with them for a little while, long enough to find out what they really want and need. To give them a sense that they've come to the right place, that they're welcome and accepted."

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The students also inform one another about the center. Bette told me, "We just had a new student today who heard by word-of-mouth by another student that this was a place to come for help in some work she was doing."

Implications and Future Directions

People who need help in learning may find the process easier if they not only have convenient access to resources but the kind of reassurance that Bette described to me. People are different. Neighborhoods are different. The welcoming and accepting messages, on the other hand, can be similar. ❑

Practitioner Research Briefs, 1999-2000 Report Series

Practitioner Research Briefs were published by the Virginia Adult Education Research Network, a project operated from the Arlington Education and Employment Program, within the Department of Adult, Career, and Vocational Education in the Arlington Public Schools. The Virginia Adult Education Research Network supports practitioner research as staff development. In practitioner research groups of teachers, tutors, and administrators use qualitative inquiry methods to systematically explore issues or problems in their own practice. Through the brief reports they write practitioner researchers contribute to both theory and practice in the adult education and literacy field.

This project was funded under Section 353 of the Adult Education Act, Title VI, P. 93-380 and amendments through the Adult Education Service, Department of Education, Commonwealth of Virginia with additional funding from the Virginia Association for Adult and Continuing Education. Cassandra Drennon and Ronna Spacone edited the 1999-2000 Report Series. The perspective expressed through each Practitioner Research Brief is that of the researcher and author. The complete series of Practitioner Research Briefs is available on the Internet at: <http://www.vcu.edu/aelweb/vaern.html>.

Published August 2000

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